In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent

A Report on Graduate Work in Qom on the Problems of Essence/Attribute and Substance/Accident

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1. Introduction

The title of our workshop, "Substance and Attribute", will sound discordant to anyone coming from an Islamic philosophical background. In Islamic philosophy there are discussions of essence and attribute and of substance and accident, but no substance and attribute. Until fairly recently, it seems that the same was true of Western philosophy, certainly so in its medieval period. Discussions of substance stem from Aristotle's *Categories*, in which substance is contrasted with nine other categories which together are called *accidents*. The Greek term for accident, *symbebekos,* was rendered into Arabic as *'arad*, indicating that which is passing. Discussions of essence and attribute entered into Islamic philosophy, however, not directly from the Greeks, but from early theological discussions among Muslim theologians, although as Muslim theology developed, Greek influence became increasingly prominent. The term translated as "attribute" is the Arabic *sifat*, which also means "adjective". The divine essence (*dhat*) or self, (*nafs*) was contrasted with the divine names and attributes (or nouns and adjectives). Indeed, Islamic theology or *kalam* is said to have begun with discussions about the attributes of God, particularly about divine speech.

One of the first questions disputed by the Muslim theologians was whether it was proper or not to use terms to describe God that are not mentioned in the Qur'an. In these discussions, the attributes of God are understood linguistically as the expressions used to describe divinity. From here, further questions were asked about the need to posit an eternal

attribute to justify the application of the divine names mentioned in the Qur'an. If God is correctly described as *the Living*, some argued, it must be because of His possession of the attribute of *life*. Here we find a shift from the linguistic to an ontological understanding of the attributes within the early *kalam* tradition; but a sustained effort was made by Mu'tazilite and Shi'ite theologians to deny that distinctions among the attributes imply any ontological distinctions within the divine essence, or that the attributes subsist alongside the divine essence as distinct realities. A further development of such disputes was that the terms "names" and "attributes" came to be used interchangeably.

One of the most influential of Shi'i theologians, Shaykh Mufid (d. 413/1022), says that an attribute is what informs a listener of an intended meaning and that as such, an attribute cannot exist without speech or writing to represent this meaning.[1] The Ash'arites, on the other hand, invested the attributes with ontological rather than merely linguistic status, and thus have been described as defending a form of attribute realism.[2] Needless to say, over the course of the centuries various Muslim thinkers have added considerable subtlety and nuance to their positions on the attributes; however, in contrast to philosophical discussions of the relationship between substance and accident, in which accidents were understood as "ways of being" since Aristotle, for the theologians, especially in the Shi'i tradition, there has been much more reticence about admitting any real ontological status for the attributes.

The main attributes discussed in the tradition of Islamic *kalam* are: power, life, knowledge, hearing, sight, speech, and will. The attributes are divided into those of essence and those of act. The attributes of essence are those that necessarily and always are properly attributed to God, such as power, life, and knowledge. The attributes of act are those which it is appropriate to attribute to God only because of some divine action and are not appropriately attributed prior to the existence of the act, such as hearing, sight, speech, and will.

In addition to Islamic philosophy and *kalam*, we also find discussions related to the substance/accident and essence/attribute distinctions in what is called "theoretical mysticism" (*'irfan nazari*). Like the Shi'ite and Mu'tazilites, the Sufis have also sought to guard the position of upholding the radical unity of God. Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) describes the relation between existence and entities in terms of the divine names. The names

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[1] Shaykh Mufid 1371 A.H.; McDermott 1978, 134.
[2] McDermott 1978, 135.

themselves are held to have no independent existence, but to be words that designate relations.[3]

Muslim philosophers, theologians and mystics have separated discussions of substance/accidents from discussions of (divine) essence/attributes to a large extent in order to place divinity beyond the categorial structure of ordinary concrete sensible objects described as substances in the Aristotelian tradition. Nevertheless, as we shall see below, there are important structural analogues between the discussions about the relationship between essence/attribute and substance/accident that can be found by reviewing the dissertations written on these topics.

2. Essence/Attribute

One of the areas that has attracted the attention of Muslim thinkers through the ages has been religious epistemology. The divine attributes have been studied from an epistemological point of view because it is through the attributes that God makes Himself known. This topic of the conditions under which attributions may correctly be made about God as reflections of human knowledge of Him has featured prominently in theological discussions of all the major sects of Islam.

In the Qur'an itself, there are numerous references to the divine names and attributes, and these have prompted some of the earliest theological discussions among Muslims. God shows man how He is to be known by introducing Himself through self-attribution. In many verses of the Qur'an, God describes Himself through particular attributes, and instructs believers to refer to Him by these attributes.

It is generally held that the essence of God is unknowable, and that because of this God can only be known through His attributes. The term for essence in the Qur'an and subsequently in Islamic theology is *dhat*. Literally, the word means *mistress,* in the sense of *possessor (feminine)*. This should not be confused with *essence* in the sense of the Latin *essentia/esse* distinction, for which the Arabic word *mahiyyah* is used. The *dhat* is the possessor of attributes, the self, identity, and in philosophical interpretations, *being*. After the Qur'an, the most important source for Islamic theology is *hadiths*, and in the sayings reported from the Prophet (*s*) and Imams (*'a*) there is ample discussion of the divine essence and attributes. Ash'arite, Mu'tazilite and Shi'ite theologians all took positions on the nature of the divine attributes and their relation to the divine

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[3] See Chittick 1998, 39.

essence. In Shi'ite theology, this issue has featured in the works of all the prominent theologians, from Shaykh Saduq and Shaykh Mufid in the 4th/10th century, through Majlisi and Lahiji of the Safavid period (11th/17th century), and it continues to be discussed as a central part of contemporary Shi'ite theology, which over the course of time became interwoven with influences drawn from Islamic philosophy and mysticism.

In Shi'ite thought, there has been a great emphasis on divine unity, and as a result, it is held that the divine attributes should not be considered as entities added to the divine essence. On the other hand, the attributes are held to be distinct from one another. God's knowledge is not His power, although each is one with the essence. Much of Shi'ite theology is devoted to discussions of how this paradox is to be resolved, generally by holding that the semantic diversity of the attributes is compatible with an ontological unity with essence.

The relation between the essence and attributes was viewed by the early Muslim philosophers in terms of Neo-Platonic emanation theory. The mystics also made use of such ideas, but emphasized the semantic relation between essence and attribute: differences in attribute are found in the different meanings through which divinity manifests Itself. The various strands of theological, philosophical and mystical speculation about the divine essence and attributes culminate with the work of Mulla Sadra, in the shadow of which all subsequent Islamic philosophy takes form.

Most of the dissertations about essence/attribute focus on how this topic is developed in one or more prominent Muslim thinkers or schools of thought. In some cases, there is a comparison with non-Muslim thinkers, such as Aristotle or Maimonides. Some attempt to understand the issue by going back to the sources in the Qur'an and *hadiths*, while others seek to defend the Shi'ite position against other schools of thought. In virtually all the dissertations, an attempt is made to present the Shi'ite theological position on this topic, particularly as elaborated in the school of Mulla Sadra, and to defend it against rivals or use it as a basis for the criticism of other positions.

Below is a list of twenty-one dissertations, arranged according to the type of approach taken to the issue of essence/attribute.

2.1 Essence/Attribute in Islamic Sources

2.11 The Divine Attributes from the Perspectives of the Qur'an and Mysticism

2.12 Philosophical and Mystical Analysis of the Names and Attributes of God in the Psalms of Islam[4]

2.13 Imam Sadiq and the Divine Philosophy of the Essence and Attributes of God

2.14 Research in Prayers with regard to the Divine Essence and Attributes

2.2 Essence/Attribute in Islamic Theology

2.21 Unity of Attributes, and Deviations of the Ash'arites, Wahhabis and Other Groups

2.22 Divine Essence and Attributes in the View of Fakhr al-Din Razi

2.23 Review and Analysis of the Views of Ghazali about the Divine Essence and Attributes

2.24 Theological Views of Qadi Sa'id Qummi

2.25 Semantics of the Divine Attributes

2.26 Semantics of Passive Attributes of God

2.27 A Comparison of the Views Allamah Hilli and Ardibilli about the Attributes of God and the Return

2.3 Essence/Attribute in Islamic Mysticism

2.31 Mutual Influences of the Ismailis and Sufis about Divine Unity

2.32 Immanence and Transcendence of God in the View of Ibn Arabi

2.4 Essence/Attribute in Islamic Philosophy and Comparative Philosophy

2.41 God in Aristotle and Ibn Sina

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[4] See Zayn al-'Abidin 1987.

2.42 Theology and the Quiddity of the Divine Attributes in the View of Maimonides and Allamah Tabataba'I

2.43 Negative Theology in the Views of Maimonides and Qadi Sa'id Qummi

2.44 Divine Essence and Attributes in the View of the Peripatetics and Illuminationists

2.45 God in the View of Sohravardi

2.46 Dialogue about the Divine Essence in Islamic Philosophy

2.47 A Review of the Attributes of God in the Views of Ibn Sina, Mulla Sadra, and Abd al-Jabbar Mu'tazili

2.48 A Review of the Criteria for Distinguishing the Attributes of Essence and Action in the Views of the Exegetes and Philosophers

Needless to say, the dissertations do not all keep neatly to these categories. There are comparisons between philosophers and theologians, philosophers and interpreters of the Qur'an, and general discussions, as well.

Discussions of Qadi Sa'id Qummi are often featured, since he represents a kind of negative theology that is generally perceived as extremist for its denial of the reality of the positive attributes. Students are encouraged to study how the position taken by Mulla Sadra is able to overcome the difficulties faced by Qadi Sa'id's negative theology.

There are structural similarities between the discussions of essence/attribute and substance/accident, although the discussions are completely separate. There are no discussions of substance/attribute or essence/accident in Islamic philosophy and theology. However, in Mulla Sadra, the identity of attributes with essence is mirrored in his claim that accidents have no existence other than the existence of the substance in which they inhere. Indeed, Mulla Sadra's views about substantial motion may be seen as a solution to the problem that arises when the Shi'ite theological claim of the identity of attributes with the essence is used as a model for the relation between substance and accidents in changing entities.

3. Substance/Accident

All of the dissertations about substance/accident focus on the doctrine of substantial motion, which is one of the most outstanding features of Mulla Sadra's thought. Some of the dissertations are purely descriptive, and attempt to present a clear exposition of Mulla Sadra's views on the issue. Others seek to defend Mulla Sadra's views from objections, or compare his views with others.

3.1 General Explanations of Substantial Motion

3.11 Substantial Motion (1992)

The M.A. thesis of Husayn Ali Qasimzadeh is divided into five chapters. The first gives the background to the substance notion in ancient Greek philosophy. The second chapter deals with the problems of defining motion and substance, as well as the place of substance among the categories and the types of substance. The third chapter reviews the philosophical and theological reasons for substantial motion. The fourth chapter considers the most famous objections to this doctrine and the answers given to them. Finally, the fifth chapter summarizes Mulla Sadra's position and elaborates the implications of substantial motion for the relation between rest and motion, the temporal origination of the world, time as a fourth material dimension, the corporeal resurrection, the relation between mind and body, and the rejection of reincarnation.

3.12 Substance and Accident in the Views of Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra (2000)

Muhammad Mahdi Mishkati compares the views of the Islamic peripatetic school led by Ibn Sina with the views of the school of Transcendent Wisdom led by Mulla Sadra on the topic of substance/accident. While Ibn Sina is committed to the existence of both material and immaterial substances, Mulla Sadra, following Sohravardi, accepts the existence of a third, intermediate kind of substance: *imaginal* substances. Imaginal substances are like immaterial substances in that they do not have a place or spatial direction in the external world; but they are like corporeal substances in that they have a shape and size. Ibn Sina held that accidents themselves possess higher order accidents. Mulla Sadra rejected the arguments for this position without offering any arguments for the contrary position. Most famously, Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra differ on whether there

can be motion or change in accidents only, or in substance as well as accidents. Mulla Sadra argues that if Ibn Sina accepts that there is a persisting subject, primary matter, through generation and corruption, this can also serve as the subject of substantial motion, with the difference that in generation and corruption the change is discontinuous and sudden while in substantial motion the change is gradual. In addition to this argument, Mulla Sadra also maintains that the subject of motion is not a thing at rest that possesses motion, but that it is the moving existence of the subject itself, whose unity is preserved through continuity rather than through relation to a stationary subject or matter. The view of the relationship between substance and accident differs in Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra in that Ibn Sina uses a causal model to explain the relationship. Substance is the agent cause of its accidents. In Mulla Sadra, however, the relation of substance to accident is much more intimate. Accidents are explained as relations of dependence to their substance that lack any existence of their own other than the existence of the substance.

3.13 Review and Criticism of the Objection to Substantial Motion from the Persistence of the Subject (1992)

Muhammad Baqiri Sabzavar devotes his M.A. thesis to Mulla Sadra's replies to the objection that if there were a change in substance, there would be no subject to undergo the change. These replies are based on the principle that existence has a fundamental priority with regard to quiddity, and the idea that in substantial motion the object that moves is identified with its motion. In short, the subject of substantial change is the changing substance extended through time.

3.2 Comparative Studies of Substantial Motion

3.21 Substantial Motion in Mulla Sadra Compared with Creative Evolution in Bergson (1996)

The author of this M.A. dissertation, Mehdi Ra'isi, finds a number of common themes in the works of Bergson and Mulla Sadra: the evolutionary progress of the material world, life (in Bergson) and existence (in Mulla Sadra) are in a constant state of flux, and are continuously being renewed, this progress is in the direction of perfection, both authors emphasize the continuous nature of time, and both hold that objects are extended through time. Both reacted against forms of atomism that were current in their respective intellectual environments, and both introduced

the idea of continual change in opposition to those who took a more static view of truth. These philosophers differ in that Bergson emphasizes intuition, while Mulla Sadra takes a more rationalist approach.

3.22 Substance in the View of the Empiricists and Islamic Philosophy (1995)

In this M.A. dissertation, Ibrahim Abarsaji reviews the definitions of substance offered by Hobbes, Berkeley and Locke, and compares them with those offered by Fakhr Razi, Sohravardi and Mulla Sadra. He also compares the views of these philosophers on the existence of material and immaterial substances and on the status of the soul.

3.23 Substantial Motion in the View of Mulla Sadra and Process Philosophy (1994)

A number of Iranian and Western thinkers have seen a similarity between Whitehead's process philosophy and Mulla Sadra's views of substantial motion. Husayn Valeh attempts to sort through the similarities and differences between these traditions of thought on such topics as object/activity duality, the material and the immaterial, the unity of God and His relation to existence and the world, the universality of motion in the material world, continuity and unity, and the nature of time.

3.3 Historical Studies of Substantial Motion

3.31 The Roots of Substantial Motion in Mysticism, Philosophy, and Theology Prior to Mulla Sadra (1992)

Ahmad Abedi (now a member of the philosophy faculty at the University of Qom) wrote his M.A. thesis on the precursors to Mulla Sadra's doctrine of substantial motion. Prof. Abedi traces the idea of substantial motion to the idea of constant creation, repeatedly mentioned in the Qur'an, as developed in the writings of the Sufis. Among Muslim philosophers and theologians, the idea of substantial motion was not accepted by most writers, although there were a few who alluded to the idea, including the Ikhwan al-Safa, Hamid al-Din Kermani and Sohravardi.

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4. Summary

From this brief overview, one can get a rough picture of the sort of research that has been done over the last fifteen years in Qom about the divine essence and substantial motion. It is plain that Mulla Sadra's thought continues to dominate Islamic theology and philosophy as it is studied at the graduate level in Qom. On the other hand, the philosophical work done in this tradition is not merely apologetic in nature. Often details of Mulla Sadra's views are subject to criticism and emendations or improvements are suggested by those who teach Islamic philosophy. There is also a strong current of thought in Iran, the *Maktab-e Tafkik* (School of Separation), which is fundamentally opposed to basing a Shi'ite theology on a philosophical system such as Mulla Sadra's, although this sort of opposition is not reflected in any of the dissertations mentioned here. Likewise unrepresented here is the tendency found among some Iranian intellectuals today to reject the tradition of Islamic philosophy altogether. For example, some Iranian Marxists have suggested that the concept of substance should be completely abandoned, and the great Muslim philosopher, exegete and theologian, Allamah Tabataba'i roundly rejected such suggestions as absurd because of the independence criterion of substance: all existents exist dependently or independently; if there were no substances, everything would be an accident, and in that case the accidents would attain independent existence and so become substances.

We also find that while the discussions of these topics are mostly confined to the Islamic cultural orbit (which includes the work of Maimonides), an increasing amount of comparative work is being done, as reflected in our list in references to Bergson, process philosophy and empiricism. This trend is increasing, and I am sure that if another review of these topics is done after another fifteen years, the number of dissertations dedicated to comparative philosophy and theology will be found to have increased tremendously.

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